

WASHINGTON -- While continuing to criticize the current health-care legislation Monday, Nebraska Republicans on Capitol Hill welcomed President Barack Obama's call for a bipartisan summit later this month.

Rep. Lee Terry, R-Neb., said he doesn't think the meeting will produce a new approach or significant changes to the Democrats' proposals, which have cleared the House and Senate but stalled before reaching a final vote.

"But it has the potential, so why not try?" said Terry.

Rep. Steve King, R-Iowa, said he expects the summit to be a mostly staged discussion and said Obama should jettison the current proposal.

"The Democrats have created a toxic stew out of health care," King said. "The American people have rejected the whole potful, and they don't want it served back to them in a bowl or a ladle or a spoon -- they want no part of it."

Sen. Mike Johanns, R-Neb., said Obama needs to sit down with a blank piece of paper, listen to both sides and seek common ground.

"If that's how he handles the meeting, then this will go well. If his attitude is 'It's got to be this bill or something nearly identical to it,' then that won't work," Johanns said. "It's a bad bill."

Terry has proposed creating a program modeled after the health benefits system used by federal employees, where the uninsured could purchase coverage. Terry said he will urge House GOP leaders to offer that proposal. He said he previously pitched the idea but never

received a response from the White House.

It may turn out that there simply is not much common ground between Republicans and Democrats on health care, Terry said, but it's still worthwhile to have a televised meeting to inform the public about each side's position.

Rep. Adrian Smith, R-Neb., endorsed the meeting as overdue outreach to Republicans by the White House.

"This is a good sign, but both sides are still a long way apart," Smith said. "We need to focus on true reform which lowers health care costs, limits unnecessary lawsuits and expands access, not simply a takeover, which we already know will not control costs."

Rep. Jeff Fortenberry, R-Neb., said last year's House debate on health care included little bipartisan discussion.

"I welcome any sincere efforts for collaboration on strengthening health care options for all Americans through commonsense reforms," Fortenberry said. He said those include addressing pre-existing conditions, rewarding wellness practices and removing barriers for affordable group insurance.

Sens. Ben Nelson of Nebraska and Tom Harkin of Iowa, both Democrats, had positive reactions to the summit proposal.

"Everyone in Congress has a responsibility to step forward and offer realistic ideas for health reform," said Nelson, who provided the crucial 60th vote for the Senate version of the bill.

Harkin, chairman of the Senate Health Committee, said the summit will help determine a path forward.

"The president's directive for health reform in his State of the Union address was clear: Do not walk away," Harkin said.

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